

hidden shelters by fakelight

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Summary:

Jonathan knows it should feel strange, talking to Nancy Wheeler at 3:30 in the morning on his brother's walkie-talkie, but somehow the lateness of the hour and the fact that just two months ago they both sliced their hands open with dull kitchen knives to attract a monster from another dimension make this seem normal.

1. leave this behind you

Author's Note:

Russian translation by LittleCrazyOwl can be found [here](#).

For a week after Will comes back from the hospital, no one sleeps in the Byers house.

Not for very long, at least.

Joyce wakes at the slightest whimper, running down the short hallway to Will's bedroom, feet jammed into sneakers to protect herself from the charred carpet that's still soaked with gasoline and monster guts.

(Will had insisted on sleeping alone. At first, Joyce had rolled out a sleeping bag at the foot of his bed, the sight of which made Jonathan's stomach lurch. He'd turned away, breathing out heavily before Will had pushed them both out of the room, insisting that everything was *fine*, he didn't need them to stay with him, he wasn't a *baby*.)

Jonathan follows a few seconds later.

They sit on either side of Will, making soothing noises and holding him close. Will clutches at their hands, burrowing his head into Joyce's stomach.

"I got you, I got you," Jonathan breathes, meeting his mother's eyes across Will's shaking body.

Joyce looks terrified, almost more so than when Will was missing. "What do I do?" she mouths, frantic. Jonathan can't give her an answer, so he just holds Will tighter and waits for his breathing to even out.

By Christmas, it's better. Will's sleeping through the night, the combination of school and day-long campaigns at Mike's and the forced normalcy Joyce has imposed upon the house returning him to some semblance of the kid he was before he came back to life.

Breakfast, every morning. Dinner every night, all three of them, Joyce rushing home from the store to make it in time.

He doesn't ride his bike, though. "It's too cold," Will says.

The carpet has been replaced, the walls repaired, Hopper and Jonathan down on their knees for an entire weekend, ripping and scrubbing and nailing until the house looks almost the same as before.

But nothing's the same, not really.

"Should we even take these down?" Jonathan had asked as he looped Christmas lights around his elbow and his gauze-wrapped hand.

"They tend to look better on the outside of the house," Hop replied, his voice gruff. Jonathan had flinched a little, but Hop wasn't angry with him, not in the way Lonnie would have been. Just prickly, his eyes clouded, his mind obviously a million miles away.

None of them talk about it, like that week in November was just a normal week in their lives.

Jonathan wishes he could have captured the house before it was cleaned up. The letters, the yo-yo. Proof, somehow, that everything had actually happened.

(Aside from Will, of course. His presence is proof enough.)

Jonathan watches Will closely, mostly because there's an ache every time he looks at his brother, the knowledge that they'd come so close

to losing him.

A small part of him wants to ask his Will what it was like in the Upside Down, thinking that talking about it might remove the grayish tinge from his brother's lips, might take away the faint cough Jonathan hears at night.

"The air there, it was toxic," his mother says, explaining away Jonathan's concerns. "We had to wear masks. He'll get better. He has us."

Jonathan doesn't know how they can heal Will, but he'll do whatever he can.

He's the only one in his house who still isn't sleeping. It's been two months now since Will returned, and every night he hears his mother tiptoe down the hall, for one last reassurance that her boy is in his bed, and then the house is silent.

Jonathan knows, in the grand scheme of things, what he did was negligible. His mother and Hop and Nancy, they were there, they went to the Upside Down, they fought to get back. Steve picked up the bat, even when they'd told him to leave.

He threw a lighter.

And the monster didn't even die. Eleven had saved them, killed it, perhaps.

But he still can't sleep.

He's on his way to the kitchen, telling himself it's to get a glass of water, but really just to have something to do other than stare at his ceiling, when he hears Nancy Wheeler's voice coming out of his brother's room.

Will's door is open every night now, something his mother had insisted upon, and Jonathan freezes, sure that the lack of sleep is causing him to hear things.

There's a crackle, and then he hears it again. "—athan?"

It's coming from the walkie-talkie lying half on Will's bedside table, and Jonathan grabs it and rushes back into his room before the sound can wake Will up.

"Nancy?" he asks, holding the button down. He wonders if he needs to say 'over'.

Her sigh of relief is so loud he can hear it through the static. "Hey."

"Hey," Jonathan says back.

"Um, you're awake? I mean, I didn't wake you up, right?"

"No, no," Jonathan says, trying to sound reassuring. "I wasn't . . . I haven't . . . I'm awake."

"Oh. Good. I mean, not *good*, but. You know."

"Yeah."

Jonathan knows it should feel strange, talking to Nancy Wheeler at 3:30 in the morning on his brother's walkie-talkie, but somehow the lateness of the hour and the fact that just two months ago they both sliced their hands open with dull kitchen knives to attract a monster from another dimension make this seem normal.

"So, how's the camera?"

Jonathan closes his eyes. "Nancy, what's wrong?"

Nancy laughs, the sound distorted. "I stole this from Mike. He's sleeping in a blanket fort in the basement. Where Eleven slept. I still can't believe he hid a whole 'nother person in our house like that."

Jonathan stays silent.

Eventually Nancy goes on. "I just thought. I mean. I saw you at school today. You were walking into the darkroom. And you looked like me."

"Like you?" Jonathan asks.

"It was better. For a while. But I think we're all just fooling ourselves, you know? It's still there."

He knows.

"I know."

"It's the ash. It's like it's in my mouth. And I keep seeing her hair, covered in it . . . and then your hand is there, and I'm holding on so tight, but it's not enough . . ." The words are spilling out of Nancy, like she's been bottling them up and now something has broken inside her.

"The lighter won't catch," Jonathan says in response. The walkie-talkie is silent, but he knows Nancy's listening. "For me. I flick and nothing happens." The monster hadn't had a face, but it had a mouth, a gaping thing, a hole that had no end. "That's what I see."

Nancy's got her hand on the button, and he can hear her breathing.

"What does Steve say? I mean, the bat, that was all him." Jonathan doesn't begrudge Steve Harrington anything, not after he showed up. Not after he ran back into the house with a girl pointing a gun at him, a monster, and the blinking lights.

"I haven't . . . I don't know if he'd understand. He was there, but he wasn't *there*, you know?"

Jonathan knows what she means. Steve didn't buy the bear trap. He wasn't in the woods.

But all he says is, "He's there now, though."

"Is he?" Nancy's voice is faint.

"He'd be at your house in a second if you asked him, Nance." The

nickname slips out, a level of familiarity he's not sure he's earned. Nancy doesn't seem to notice.

There's a long pause. Jonathan thinks maybe she's fallen asleep. The walkie-talkie crackles faintly in his hand.

"But so would you."

Jonathan doesn't deny it. He doesn't say anything. The silence stretches out between them, through the woods, across Hawkins.

"Goodnight, Jonathan." He can't be sure, her words are muffled, but she sounds better somehow. Less frantic. Calmer.

"Goodnight, Nancy."

2. let them around you

Nancy Wheeler does not do things halfway.

Steve was wrong, her GPA is a 4.05. AP classes.

When the choice had come, ballet or school, she'd dropped ballet like it was nothing. Like she hadn't spent every weekend every fall rehearsing for *The Nutcracker* (Snow, Flower, Shepherds), or the spring rehearsing for the classical (*Giselle*, her last year).

She still wears the necklace her father had given her after her first recital. Not for her father, but as a reminder of what she'd given up.

Unfortunately, it seems to go the other way, too.

Because when it comes to the crippling fear that comes from your best friend being pulled into another world and being eaten by a monster, a monster that chased you through a gray hell landscape and that you yourself tried to shoot with a stolen gun until you ran out of bullets, well, it just seems to be another thing Nancy Wheeler commits herself to fully.

Not that anyone would know.

Once word got out that Barb had been declared dead, actually dead, she hadn't fled to the city (Nancy can't believe anyone bought that story. *Barbara*? Running away?), the whispers about her and Jonathan Byers had died down immediately. Nothing stops a rumor like a juicier rumor.

Now Nancy is a tragic figure, people she doesn't even know saying how sorry they are in the hallways, *still*, Steve acting as a shield-

slash-escort as she goes from Chem to English.

She's almost perfected the fragile smile that makes people think they've really gotten through to her, that she's grateful for and appreciates their fake sympathy.

"She's so strong," they say, pitying her.

She carries herself that way. Nancy wants to be a person who doesn't feel the need to live up to others' expectations, but she knows herself well enough to know that's not possible. So instead she makes her flash cards and sits in the library, studying like the diligent student she's supposed to be.

That her usual table has a perfect view of the door to the darkroom is just a coincidence, Nancy tells herself.

What she can't explain is how she can't seem to start flipping through the cards until she sees the door close behind the shaggy mop of hair that belongs to Jonathan.

Once he's inside, once she knows where he is, that he's within shouting distance, only then can she begin to study, the hands holding the flash cards shaking slightly.

He looks haunted. They all look haunted.

The walkie-talkie thing is an act of desperation.

She's taken to wandering the house after the nightmares wake her up, cold sweat and panicked breaths, flipping on all the lights, staring into the fridge even though she isn't hungry. The night one of her passes brings her through the basement, Nancy's heart races when she sees someone in the blanket fort Mike has refused to allow them to take down.

("If she comes back, she'll want to be somewhere safe. Somewhere she knows," he pleaded. Karen couldn't argue with that, not with the look on Mike's face, and the fort remains.)

Nancy works up the courage to look and lets out a relieved breath once she sees it's just Mike, one foot sticking out from under the blankets. His hand is clutching the walkie-talkie, and she wonders which of his gang he fell asleep talking to.

She wonders if maybe he was trying to reach Eleven.

(She won't admit it out loud, but she's jealous of Mike, of all of them. They got Will back. She lost her only friend.)

(Maybe not her only friend.)

Nancy doesn't know what compels her to sneak the walkie-talkie out from under Mike's hand, to take it back up to her room. She thinks maybe this could be a bad idea.

They're not friends, not really.

She calls his name anyway. If he hears her, maybe it means something.

He answers on her second try.

When Nancy wants to pretend she's safe, it's not the moment they set the monster on fire she imagines. It's when Jonathan pulled her from the tree, out of the Upside Down, when she clung to him like the lifeline he was. The way he wrapped his entire body around hers like an anchor.

But Nancy had made her choice, or the choice had been made for

her. Because Will Byers was in a hospital bed and Jonathan Byers was sitting next to him. And Steve was sitting next to her.

And Steve is great. He's everything she could ask for in a boyfriend.

Jonathan Byers . . . isn't. She hasn't forgotten the picture, the argument in the woods. Spitting insults at each other, the stark truths laid bare. They aren't friends.

(It's deeper than that. They're bound together, through a baptism by fire. Or, a baptism by monster. Either way, things were set alight.)

But he's also the type of person who would pull out her sleeping bag from seventh grade and stay with her, knowing what she needed before she even had to ask.

He calls her Nance.

She doesn't ask him to come over. She knows he would. She wants to. She wants him to ask her. But it's enough for now, to know. When she says goodnight, when she rolls over, Nancy positions herself carefully, so that if time overlapped their hands would be touching.

She steals Mike's walkie-talkie every night for the next week.

Mike walks into her room one morning and throws something on her bed. "Here. It's my old one."

Nancy looks over. It's different, not the sturdy black block they used in the gym. She frowns.

Mike sighs. "You woke Dustin up last night. This one's tuned to a different channel. Will already showed Jonathan how to switch his."

Nancy isn't sure if her face could get any redder.

If he were only a few years older, there would be a shit-eating grin plastered on Mike's face. For now, though, he just looks slightly

embarrassed, if a little bit smug.

“It’s not like that,” Nancy tries to explain, again.

“Okay,” Mike says, rolling his eyes.

“*Mike!*”

He’s already gone.

They don’t always talk for long, or even at all. Just the knowledge that Jonathan is on the other side is enough for Nancy, that he’s a push of a button away.

Her problem is the nightmares.

Sometimes it’s when she jerks awake, pressed flat against her mattress, grasping desperately at the walkie-talkie, holding it like it’s the only thing keeping her tethered to this world, out of the Upside Down. He always answers.

He doesn’t sleep at all.

Other times, it’s before she falls asleep, after she’s made her customary phone call to Steve, once Jonathan gets home from work, once the Trig problems are completed. “What did you photograph today?” she mumbles sleepily, wrapped in blankets against the January chill.

Her window is always unlocked. Her mother keeps asking if anyone else feels a draft.

One time, only once, he reaches out to her, his voice stuttering over the first syllable of her name, like it’s taking all his effort just to be the first one to speak.

“It’s not anything,” he says. “I just wanted to know if you were okay.”

Nancy knows he's lying, but she's lying too. "I'm okay. Are you okay?"

"Have you talked to Byers lately?" Steve asks. "Does he like the camera?"

"I'll ask, next time he comes to pick up Will," Nancy lies, again. Yet another talent she doesn't need practice to be good at. Lying and shooting a gun. She'll have to put it on her college applications.

When it's the worst one yet, Barb's face peeling open like a flower, Nancy sobbing into her pillow, she whisper-screams his name across the void.

"I'm here, I'm here," Jonathan repeats. "I got you."

Nancy breathes out, shuddering.

"Can you—"

"Yes," he says.

3. i'll miss keeping you

Jonathan waits. He's not sure for what.

But it feels like something's coming.

What they're doing, it doesn't make any sense. But the world as he knows it doesn't make sense, these days.

Every day, he glances over to the library on his way to the darkroom. She's always there. Sometimes their eyes meet.

In the daylight, Nancy's strong. She carries herself with the air of someone who went up against a monster to save her best friend and lived to tell the tale. She doesn't—shouldn't—need someone like him around.

But for some unknown reason, she reaches out to him, him specifically. And he always answers. Jonathan doesn't know what that means, what that says. About him, or Nancy.

It's not like there's anyone else he could talk to about what happened, not even before he became the guy whose little brother died and came back. He knows what people said about him, his family, before. They're kind enough to keep it from him these days.

(Other than Steve, hissing out his poison outside the theater. They might be okay now; nods in the hallways, occasional conversations in the back parking lot, shared trauma going further toward creating something resembling a friendship than he could have expected, but Jonathan doesn't regret the punch. Punches.)

And he's not even sure he is who he was before, as hard as he might fight against it.

Occasionally, she touches, tentatively, on that night.

“Just having someone there,” she says. Or, “You don’t move when you sleep. Barb always complained that I kicked.”

“I didn’t want to be alone, either,” he reminds her.

When she finally asks, he answers before she even finishes the sentence.

He scribbles a note to leave on the fridge for his mother, because one missing son is enough for a lifetime.

Jacket. Shoes. One quick check on Will, who’s barely visible under all the blankets piled on his bed. Avoiding the squeaking floorboard, the hidden holes from the nails that held the bear trap in place.

Someone, too bulky to be Joyce, is at the kitchen table, the burning end of a cigarette glowing in the dark. Jonathan jumps out of his skin, hitting the wall until he finds the light switch.

Hopper is sitting at the head of the table, looking like he belongs there in a way Lonnie never had.

“Where you headed?” he drawls. “What are you doing here?” Jonathan asks, a beat too late.

“I asked first.”

Jonathan eyes him warily. “Nancy,” he admits, after it becomes clear Hopper isn’t going to be the one to break.

Hop looks at him, his gaze probing. There’s a long pause. “Well, you better get going then.”

Jonathan doesn’t take the time to question it.

When he makes it onto the roof, Nancy's already there, throwing open the window and yanking him inside. Pulling him close with shaking hands.

He stands very still, trying to envelop her, her arms wrapped around his waist inside his jacket. Breathing in and out.

"Thanks," she whispers into his shoulder. Then, "You're freezing."

"Sorry." He tries to pull away, but she keeps holding on tight.

"Was it bad?"

He feels her nod against his chest.

Eventually she releases him, looking up uncertainly, like she doesn't know what the next step is. Before, they were caught up in something bigger, imminent threats pushing them toward each other, protection against the unknown. Now, it's something different. Something deliberate.

"I'm just gonna," Nancy says, gesturing toward the door, scrunching up her mouth. "Do you, um . . ." She flicks her eyes toward the bed, the covers thrown back.

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

While she locks the door, he shrugs off his jacket. Toes off his shoes.

When she's slipped back under the covers, the ones on his side left pulled back, he sits on the edge of the bed. (*It's not your side*, he thinks. *Don't think of it as your side.*) One foot on the floor.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Nancy shakes her head.

"Do you—"

“Just, come here, okay?”

When he finally settles, same position as the last time, slowly, slowly, Nancy stretches out one of her hands—her left. She places it on top of his, lining up their scars.

“I left her there,” she finally whispers.

“It’s not your fault.” Jonathan wants to pull her to him, tell her that they did everything they could, but he settles for curling his fingers slightly, interlocking them with hers.

She’s quiet for a long time.

“Everyone keeps telling me they’re sorry. About Barb. I don’t even know why anymore. But no one said that to you, when Will was missing.”

“You did,” he says.

He closes his eyes.

When he opens them again, Nancy’s watching him, her head tilted up. It’s still dark out, but he can tell hours have passed.

“Hey,” he says, forcing himself awake. “What happened?”

“You were out like a light.” She sounds amused.

He cranes his neck to look at his watch. 6:15. “Did you sleep?”

Nancy shakes her head, with something that could be a smile on her face. He’s torn between sitting up, which would probably make this less awkward, but also never wanting to sit up again, because even though their hands are no longer touching, Nancy’s got her leg tangled up in his somehow and its warm weight feels like the reason he fell asleep in the first place—he feels safer here. A monster never crawled out of Nancy’s ceiling.

“No, it was good,” she says, before he can apologize. “I know you haven’t been sleeping.”

He hasn’t. She does know this.

“Yeah, but—”

“Jonathan.” She’s staring at him. “If it means you get some sleep too, then . . .”

“Maybe I should just come here every night.” He means it as a joke, but Nancy looks like she’s actually considering it. “I’m just kidding,” he says quickly. “Steve and I just hit two months without punching each other.”

“Can we not talk about Steve right now?”

Jonathan gives her a look.

Nancy lowers her gaze. “I know.”

The silence that follows is loaded, filled with things almost said, names and words. Nancy worries her lip with her teeth. Jonathan swallows, his throat suddenly dry.

(It’s easier, when they aren’t face to face. Forgetting the choices they’ve made, where they stand.)

“I should—” “No, yeah—” They talk over each other, the tension rising. Jonathan pushes himself up. Nancy pulls her leg back.

“You okay?” he asks, because regardless of everything, falling asleep, he came there for a reason. She nods.

He has one foot out the window when she calls his name.

Nancy reaches into her closet, and pulls out something bulky, something blue and striped. She walks to the window, unwinding, as

he balances, waiting. She holds a gun out to him. Jonathan supposes this would be strange, in any other situation but theirs.

“I never gave this back.”

“Keep it,” he says. A half-smile. “Every monster hunter needs one.”

He jumps down to the ground.

4. run wild, voice loud

Nancy stands at her window, watching Jonathan disappear into the darkness, feeling time overlap again.

Instead of poring over books and formulating theories and trying desperately to find a way to save Barb, to save Will, she watched Jonathan Byers sleep and wondered.

Because as much as she clings to who she used to be, she knows it's futile, fleeting. For so many reasons.

She remembers the last time they did this (sliding down the roof, jumping down herself, one hand against the house, one hand reaching down to his), when she leaned up against a ridiculous tiger mural and made a choice, when she slid bullets into the very gun she's holding now with hands that didn't shake, not a bit.

And when it was all over, all she wanted was for everything to go back to the way it was. For everything to be the same.

But nothing's the same, not really.

She'd slapped Steve and broken into the Chief's office and shot a monster.

She was that girl before.

She can be that girl again.

"Okay, then," she says out loud.

First things first.

"It's not working, Steve," she says. Trying not to be too blunt.

"Oh thank god," he sighs, raising his eyes heavenward. "I thought I

was going to have to do it.”

“You’re *great*,” she continues, “it’s just that I’m not—wait, what?”

It turns out Steve has been patrolling the neighborhood on weekend mornings and occasionally, after they get off the phone at night, “For monster sightings, obviously,” and one of his neighbors has taken an interest. (Not in the monsters. In Steve.)

“And I didn’t want to make you deal with my stuff, because you had your own stuff to deal with, you know?”

“I know,” Nancy says, feeling an irrational sting of pain. Hypocrites, the pair of them. They talk for a little longer (“A *sophomore*? Ugh, Steve, really?”), and when they hug goodbye, it feels more like a reorientation than an ending. She wonders what they would have been, without the monster.

“Nance,” he calls after her as she walks back toward the school. “It’s Byers, isn’t it?”

She thinks about denying it, but ends up nodding at him, hands shoved in her coat pockets.

“I should have never chipped in for that camera,” Steve says, but he’s laughing, and Nancy feels lighter than air.

“Steve and I broke up,” she says into the walkie-talkie.

Saturday night, it’s just Nancy and Mike and Holly, their parents in the city for a night of “much-needed culture” as her mother put it on her way out the door.

“It’s cool, if you want to invite Steve over,” Mike says as he cuts up Holly’s pizza into bite sized pieces.

“Oh.” Nancy’s surprised, both at his offering and that he doesn’t know. So much for telling each other everything. “We actually, uh,

broke up. Last week.”

Mike shrugs. “Okay.” He’s quiet for a few minutes, and then, “So are you gonna be Jonathan’s girlfriend now?”

Nancy glares at him. “It’s not . . .” she almost continues, *like that*, but stops herself. “It’s not that simple.”

“Seems pretty simple to me.”

“Things are different, when you’re older,” she tries to explain. “It’s not like you and—” Nancy swallows the name (the number) before it comes out, but Mike looks up sharply.

“Not like what?”

“I didn’t mean . . . I didn’t mean to bring her up, Mike. I’m sorry.” She twists her mouth in apology.

“Why not? No one wants to talk about her, but she saved us. She lived in this house. She saved all of us.” His voice rising in agitation. Nancy glances over at Holly, who’s eating her pizza, oblivious.

“I just, with her gone, I didn’t think you wanted to—”

“She’s not gone.”

Nancy looks at him apprehensively.

“She’s out there, I know it,” he says, his voice breaking a little.

“Mike.” It comes out more pitying than she intended and Nancy can see him start to crack. Before she can say anything more, he’s shoving back his chair and bolting for the basement, the noise causing Holly to jump and burst into tears. By the time Nancy’s got her calmed down and into bed, she figures Mike’s had enough time to recover, and goes looking for him.

She finds him in the fort, shielding himself from her, from the world. Nancy kneels down, lifting the blanket. He turns his head away.

“Scootch over.”

For a minute, she thinks he's going to keep shutting her out. But then Mike scootches, albeit slowly, not looking at her. When they're both lying next to each other, the weight of the blankets cutting them off from everything but themselves, Nancy turns her head to look at her brother.

"If you say she's out there, then she's out there."

Mike meets her eyes. "She is. I know it."

"Okay." It's just one word, but Nancy can see the way it affects Mike. She knows how it feels, to have someone finally believe you. She stares at the ceiling of the fort, trying to imagine what Eleven felt in here. Safe, she hopes.

"Why'd you break up with Steve?" he asks abruptly.

Nancy thinks, trying to find a way to put it into words. "I didn't need a boyfriend," she explains slowly, her eyes on the blankets. "I needed . . . that's not it. I didn't want to need anyone, anything. I wanted to do it on my own. Whatever *it* is. Does that make any sense?"

"No," Mike says bluntly. "We couldn't have done any of what we did alone."

She wonders how he got so old, so fast. She supposes he had to do a lot of growing up, when Will was gone. Or after.

"You don't need to be alone," he says, softly.

Nancy elbows him affectionately. "I'm not alone. I have you."

"Oh," Jonathan says.

She moves the gun from its hiding place in her closet to her bedside table. (The sweater goes under his pillow. Sometimes she reaches over, feeling the coarseness of the wool under her fingers.)

She cuts off her hair. Her mother cries when she sees it, but Nancy likes the choppy bob, likes the way it makes her feel. Like someone capable, like nothing can hold her back.

She talks to Jonathan about stupid things, about nothing at all, her thumb on the button, waiting for him to come back to her. He starts to do the same.

She keeps getting A's, because there are certain things that will never change.

She eats lunch by herself, or with Steve and his new girlfriend, or in the darkroom, and doesn't mind the whispers that resurface.

The nightmares don't stop.

They're part of who she is now. She's accepted that.

She thinks Barb would approve.

"Wait for me tomorrow," Nancy says. Then, inspired by her brother, "Over and out."

One last thing.

She walks into the darkroom, filled with purpose.

He's alone, bathed in the red light.

"Let's go," she says.

Jonathan looks up. Takes her in.

"Let's go," she repeats.

She doesn't need a boyfriend. But Mike was right. Half-right. She doesn't have to be alone.

And she wants whatever this is.

“Where are we going?” he asks, smiling slightly. “Monster hunting?”

Nancy grins at him, and feels totally, completely free.

5. if you call out in the dark

His mother is waiting for him when he gets home, in the same chair previously occupied by Hop. (Who seems to be conveniently gone from the house.)

Jonathan stares at his mother. Joyce stares right back. They both know where he was. And they both know who saw him leave. Neither of them wanting to be the first one to speak. Jonathan realizes the stubborn gene must lie on her side of the family.

(And that Hopper would probably outlast both of them.)

Joyce sighs. "Just, be careful," she says finally, shaking her head. "I'll make breakfast today."

"You too," he yells into the kitchen as he goes to wake Will up.

(He knows he doesn't have to worry about her. But it feels nice to pretend.)

Jonathan can see Will standing in the middle of his room through the open door, and calls his name. There's a strange moment, when Will jerks around at the sound, the look on his face something close to panic, and his gaze passes right through Jonathan, like he can't see him at all.

"Will?"

Will blinks once, twice, and then his eyes focus on where Jonathan's standing.

"Hey," Will says. "Is Mom cooking?"

He rushes past before Jonathan can say anything.

"Hey man! How it's going with Nance?" Steve slams his tray down

next to him, tater tots flying, scattering the notes Jonathan is poring over before next period's test.

"What the fuck, Steve," Jonathan says, with feeling.

Steve doesn't seem to notice the mayhem he's causing, both currently, and in Jonathan's life as of late. The most recent disruption had come the weekend before, when he'd stopped by unannounced and spent most of the afternoon cracking jokes with Will while Jonathan tried and failed to write a paper on *A Tale of Two Cities*.

If this is what having friends is like, Jonathan thinks it might be more trouble than it's worth. (Not that he'd call Steve a friend.)

"I'm just saying," Steve mumbles around a mouthful of chicken patty, "you need to get on that."

"Just to be clear," Jonathan says, "you're pushing me toward your ex-girlfriend, the one we literally got into a physical fight over."

"You didn't hit me because of Nancy, you hit me because I was being a dick." Steve smiles innocently-slash-knowingly at him. It's incredibly irritating, which only serves to remind Jonathan of why he punched him in the first place. He thinks about doing it again.

"*How* are we having this conversation?" he says instead.

"Because I'm a good guy," Steve tells him without an ounce of irony. "And we all deserve to be happy. We almost died."

"We told you to leave," Jonathan reminds him.

"We almost *died*," Steve repeats, intensely. He stares at Jonathan.

"Okay," Jonathan finally says, giving up. "Fine. You win."

The only problem is he has no idea what he's doing.

Nancy somehow seems to be everywhere at once for him. Not just dragging him out of the darkroom to drive around aimlessly, but dropping Mike off at his house and then not leaving for hours, calling to him at night, static crackling through the warming air.

She tells him about how she used to dance, and where her family goes to the beach every summer, and about where she wants to apply next year. ("NYU," he lets slip one night. "It's where I've always wanted to go." He feels almost embarrassed, saying it out loud like that, admitting a dream he's held onto since he was a kid, but he can hear the smile in her voice when she says, "You know, Columbia admits women now?")

He talks about what he's listening to. Explains, as best as he can, photography. ("Developer, stopper, fixer," he says. He can't put into words the best part, watching the image appear suddenly from the blank whiteness of the photo paper, but she's seen it. She knows what it's like.) How weird it is that Steve keeps trying to be friends with him, and how he kind of doesn't mind.

They don't talk about the big things. Well, the one truly big thing. No monsters, no Will, no girls from who-knows-where.

Sometimes he thinks they're talking just to keep the silence from overpowering them, but it's enough. It's better.

There's always something left unspoken, but that's comforting too, in a way.

There's no light in the film closet. It's the darkest place he's ever been, and that includes the house the minute the lights went out.

She finds him there, again. He hears her first, muffled through the door, a response, and then her again, clearer, "—really *fucking* funny," and then the door rotates, and she's there. He can't see a thing, but he knows it's her.

"Let me guess," he says, "Byers in the closet joke?"

“How did you—”

Nancy stops, realizing how he knows. Because he’s heard it. So many times.

“I forgot other people use this,” she says instead, trying to cover up the awkwardness. “It’s usually just you. It’s so dark in here.”

“Midterm projects,” he explains. And then, “It’s called a darkroom for a reason.”

“Ha ha,” she says, sarcasm dripping. The film closet is tiny, barely big enough for one person, and he can sense her, just inches from him. “Where are you?” she asks, and then he feels fingers grasping at his shirt. “Oh, hi.”

“I’m almost done,” he says, winding his last reel, the best of the bunch, Will and his mother, one of Nancy, staring straight into the camera, eyes wide.

“No, it’s okay. I wanted to talk to you anyway.” Her hand withdrawing, hearing her scrape against the wall as she leans up against it.

Jonathan raises an eyebrow, then remembers she can’t see it. “About?”

“The fact that we don’t . . . talk about it,” she says bluntly. “All of us. It’s like it never happened.”

He tenses at the taboo subject, but the darkness helps, another layer between him and her. “I think we all just want to forget,” he ventures.

“Mike thinks she’s out there,” Nancy says. “Eleven. I caught him sneaking out to look for her last night. He doesn’t want to forget.” A pause. “I don’t want to forget. We have to do something.”

Jonathan has no idea what they can do, but she sounds so fervent that his only option is to agree.

“Okay. We do something. But where does he think she is, living in

the woods? Or somewhere else?" They both know where that somewhere is.

"I dunno. But . . . it made me think." There's a long silence, and then Nancy inhales, like she's preparing herself for something. "Do you think it's dead? The monster."

The answer, when it comes, surprises him, even as he says it out loud.

"No."

He realizes this is what he's been waiting for. For someone to ask him this very question.

"Me neither."

Jonathan takes a moment to consider this, how his world has shifted in the last five seconds.

"I think something's wrong with Will," he blurts out, because it's all connected, and if he can't say his deepest, darkest fears out loud here, in front of the only person he trusts, then where can he? "He keeps looking through me. Like he's somewhere else." The same somewhere Eleven could be. Is.

She breathes, once, twice, then he can almost hear her shoulders square. "Then that's just another thing we'll have to take care of."

Jonathan lets out a laugh, because she makes it sound like nothing. Like all they have to do to find Eleven and fix Will is head down to the Army Surplus store and pick up some more supplies. But she sounds so sure, so certain, that all he can do now is follow her lead.

"Okay," he says. "Let's finish it."

6. what we're made of

When it happens, it happens fast.

"I hear you and the freak are at it again," Carol needles her, leaning on the locker next to hers. Nancy thinks of Barb and gets even more annoyed.

"Go away, Carol," Nancy bites out. Because teachers are walking by, she does not say, "Fuck off," which is the only thing she wants to say to Carol, ever.

"Speaking of the perv," Carol sniffs, and Nancy rolls her eyes, because they're supposed to be meeting at his car today, but then Jonathan's grabbing her hand and pulling her down the hallway.

"Something happened," he says, and his voice is urgent.

He explains in the car, speeding away from the school as Nancy roots around in the back seat for the hammer, which she'd stashed back there ages ago. (Easily accessible, hiding the tools of the trade away, just in case.)

"My mom didn't say much, just that Will collapsed, and that Dustin won't stop screaming that he disappeared for a few minutes, and that all the lights in the school flickered. They're back at my house."

Having located the hammer, Nancy grasps it in both of her hands. "Mike?"

"He's there too," he reassures her, then turns his attention to the road.

Nancy feels a foreboding eventuality bearing down on them, like this was always going to happen, that they've just been putting off the inevitable for months and months.

“Okay,” she breathes.

Will’s lying on the couch coughing faintly when they rush in, the dog standing next to him like an honor guard, Joyce pacing in the corner while Hopper talks her down. The boys are in the kitchen, shouting over each other. All of them, back together again.

They separate, Jonathan to Will, herself to the corner. If she has to pick a group, she’s going to the grown-ups.

“We don’t know what happened,” Hopper says to her as Joyce pulls her into a hug. It’s strange, but nice.

“Are you two okay?” Joyce asks.

“We’re fine,” Nancy says, eyes locked with Hopper over Joyce’s shoulder. “What *do* you know?”

“I saw it. I saw her,” Will manages to gasp out.

Mike runs to Will’s side. “Eleven? You saw Eleven?”

Hopper pushes past her, talking over Mike. “You said you saw *it*?”

Will nods, then starts coughing again. Jonathan places his hand on Will’s shoulder, looking up from where he kneels next to the couch.

“I think—”

And then they’re both gone, Jonathan and Will, disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Nancy chokes out a gasp, feeling like someone’s slapped her. They’re gone.

She looks around helplessly. Everyone else looks stunned, Joyce looks like she’s about to faint. Nancy’s about to run to the phone to call 911 (which is *stupid*, the Chief of Police is standing *right next to her*) when they flicker back, Will coughing even harder, Jonathan looking around wildly.

“What the fuck? I knew it!” Dustin screams.

They were in the Upside Down. Obviously.

Will sobs apologies into Joyce's shoulder while Nancy tackles Jonathan, knocking him flat onto the floor. He wraps his arms around her, holding her as tight as she's holding him. Even though he was only gone for a minute. He was still gone. And she doesn't know what she'd have done if he hadn't come back.

"It was there," he says, his voice low, once their breathing has returned to normal. She pulls away, looking into his eyes.

"You were right."

Nancy feels strange, vindicated and terrified and resolved all at the same time.

They all separate, because her monster hunting cache is back at her house ("I'm driving," Nancy says, and doesn't budge until Jonathan gives her the keys.), and Hopper has already left, rushing away after a whispered conversation with Joyce, "They'll know," the only fragment she catches.

"Meet us in the woods," Mike says to Jonathan. "We'll be at the castle."

Nancy has no idea what he's talking about, but she grabs her brother and hugs him quickly. "Be careful."

"Yeah," he says. And then, staring at the ground, "You too."

Jonathan's quiet in the car, staring out the window, taking measured breaths. Nancy looks over at him frequently, almost dangerously so, her eyes on him, not the road.

"I didn't realize," he says suddenly, as they hit the cul-de-sac, as she turns the car off, "what it was like over there. For him to go back. The dark, the . . ."

Nancy feels a swoop in her stomach as he trails off, the fear threatening to claw itself free. She thinks about Barb, and when she crawled through the tree, and the utter helplessness she'd felt as the gun clicked uselessly in her hands.

"But you," he continues, "you made it back. All on your own."

"No," she says, turning to him. "You were there, I couldn't have gotten out, not without you."

Because there's more to it than the fear. The determination she felt, going back to the house, finishing it. The longing, the freedom, the strength.

"Nancy," he says, and he's about to go on, but she stops him, remembering her promise to herself, to who she is now, to what she isn't letting hold her back.

She kisses him swiftly, desperately, because they've been here before, and she's spent too much of her life hesitating, and she's lost so many things, but he isn't going to be one of them, not this time. There's an urgency to it, the way he kisses her back, his hands coming up to rest on top of where hers are fisted into his shirt, pressing her closer.

When she pulls away, a little breathless, she looks up, into his eyes. He's staring back at her, holding her hands tight. He smiles at her, the half-smile, the one that she knows is for her alone, and she smiles back, letting herself hold this moment, him, close. Once they get out of the car, they'll have to face what's coming, but right now, she lets herself keep them, just like this.

But even as she pulls her hands from his, she knows he's with her.

"Let's go," she says.

Jonathan's putting her phone back on the hook when she backs out of her closet, hauling the box that has the leftovers from their previous attack, plus a few new items Nancy's acquired in the past months. (*Be prepared*, the Girl Scout motto, the only thing Nancy remembers from her Brownie days, that and the friendship song,

silver and gold.)

“Was that your mom? Is everything okay over there?” she asks, her voice strained.

“I called Steve. We’re picking him up on the way.”

Nancy stops in her tracks, dropping the box on the floor. It lands with a heavy clunk. “You called Steve?”

“We need him,” Jonathan says, ducking his head as he goes to pick up the box. Nancy watches as he carries the box out the door, down the stairs.

“Okay, then,” she says.

She grabs the gun, and follows.

Back in the car, she flips open the barrel, and closes it. Flips, and closes. She knows the bullets are still there. She just wants to be sure.

Jonathan reaches over and grabs her hand, holding it still.

“Hey,” he says. “We got this.”

Nancy looks at him, and then down at where their fingers are intertwined.

She remembers the first time, startled into connection by her mother. And then on the couch, remembering the way her fingers played over his, tentative, yearning. She’d known then. She’d known then, and she doesn’t know what stopped her. (Steve. Steve stopped her. Oh, Steve. She could kill Steve.)

In her bed.

Holding her pressed against him.

“Yeah,” she replies. “We’ve got this.”

She grips his hand, tighter.

Steve gets into the back seat, bat in hand.

“You kept that?” Nancy asks. “I was wondering where it was.”

He’s looking at the box next to him. “Is that a machete?”

“Yeah, and?” Jonathan says, looking back at Steve in the rearview mirror.

“Bitchin’. Oh and, dibs.”

Steve rolls down his window as they drive away.

The boys and Joyce are clustered around a haphazard pile of sticks and blankets when they arrive. Nancy’s never seen anything that looks less like a castle in her life, but the sign proclaims it and so that’s where they meet.

Lucas immediately grabs a crowbar from the box, but Dustin refuses on principle. Mike can’t be bothered, frantically quizzing Will on what he sees.

“He’s disappeared twice more since you left,” Joyce says, anguished. “He’s seeing it now, right now. What do we do? How do we stop it?”

“We kill it,” Hopper says, running up behind them, holding a shotgun and a piece of paper.

(Nancy could have told him that.)

Hopper explains further, something about incubation and returning to the host, and symbiotic relationships between Will and Eleven and the monster, which Nancy hears but doesn’t process, her mind focused on the first thing he had said.

Kill it. Finish what she—they—started, all those months ago.

“It’s happening!” Mike calls to them desperately. Will’s almost hyperventilating, and his eyes are wild.

They’re not ready, Nancy realizes, they aren’t anywhere close to prepared, but it’s happening now, and this is their chance, their only chance to stop this. Finish it.

She lunges toward Mike, who’s holding onto Will with a desperation Nancy can almost feel, stretching her arm behind her, hoping that someone’s going to grab onto it. She feels someone take her hand (Jonathan, she can tell, she knows this without even looking), and then she’s got Mike’s elbow in her grasp, and then there’s a jerk and everything goes dark.

Nancy looks around.

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god, what did we do, we have to get out of here, we’re all gonna die—”

“Shut up, Steve!” Nancy hisses.

She can hear Dustin echoing Steve’s sentiments somewhere to her right.

They’re there, all of them, back in the landscape that’s haunted Nancy’s nightmares since that fateful November night, ash and oozing blackness and right above them, towering, the monster itself. It’s gotten bigger, Nancy notes with an almost clinical detachment.

Someone screams, not her, and then Nancy’s flying backward, the monster’s head jerking to the side in a vaguely familiar way. The fear comes rushing back.

“Oh *shit*! It’s got her powers!”

It’s one of the boys shouting and Nancy struggles to push herself up from where she’s landed, her head spinning. Almost everyone else has been thrown aside too, Hopper slumped against a tree, the boys to her left in a crumpled heap.

The only one left standing is Will, an eerily calm look on his face. Joyce grabs him, even as he begins to struggle against her.

She sees Mike dashing to the castle, unnoticed by the monster for now, throwing the blanket aside, and then Nancy sees her, Eleven, lying still on the ground.

Nancy tries to think, tries to come up with a plan, but everything's happened so quickly, and she's lost the gun, thrown from her hand as the monster pushed her away. She feels paralyzed, fear rooting her feet into the ground, looking around helplessly. She sees the shotgun, just a few feet in front of her.

Mike's shaking Eleven, screaming her name.

The monster begins to move.

"Steve!" Jonathan shouts. He points, and Nancy sees Steve steel himself.

(Jonathan looks back at her, just for an instant, his eyes locked on hers.)

And then they're both rushing toward toward it, leaping almost in slow-motion, each grabbing an arm and tackling it to the ground. Hopper's struggling toward them, but he's not going to make it.

Nancy shakes her head. Not again. She won't let this happen. Not this time.

"Fuck this," she says.

She swallows her fear, scoops up the shotgun and starts to run. Sprinting to where the monster lies pinned down, skidding to a stop, jamming the shotgun into where the monster's face is open, gaping.

"This is for Barb, you son of a bitch."

She pulls the trigger.

Many things happen in quick succession. Eleven's eyes open. Will leans over, still in Joyce's arms, coughing harder than ever, something large and black and solid coming out onto the ground. And everything begins to fall apart.

"We have to get out of here!" Nancy screams over the rushing wind that's begun to blow around them, ash spinning in little tornadoes. How they're going to do that, she has no idea. But they have to go, before the world around them collapses.

Nancy looks back into the little fort, where the wind hasn't reached, an oasis of calm in the midst of the destruction. Eleven's reaching her hand out to where Mike kneels in front of her, gently placing her fingertips on his face.

"Mike," she says.

Eleven blinks.

And just like that, they're back in the woods.

There are two hospital beds this time, Will in one, Eleven in the other.

Dustin and Lucas clamber around a smiling Will, exclaiming over the events that they all just lived through, like only their narration will make it real. Joyce and Hopper seated against the wall, her head on his shoulder.

Mike sits next to Eleven, the look on his face something close to awe.

Steve stands awkwardly next to her, his eyes flicking toward the door, like he's not sure if he's intruding. Like he's not sure where he belongs. Nancy could tell him, if he asked. He belongs with them. All of them.

It's like Mike said. They don't have to be alone.

Jonathan stands in between them all, watching.

Time overlaps.

Nancy doesn't hesitate. No shrinking away, no clinging to what used to be, not this time. She killed a monster and kissed Jonathan Byers and her life is her own now.

She walks up to him and takes his hand.

Notes for the Chapter:

First and foremost, many thanks to everyone who has read, enjoyed, kudosed, and commented on this story, which I didn't plan on writing, and mostly just fell out into gdocs because I had a bunch of feelings and needed to let them out in some way. (So, basically every story on this website.)

The title of the story (and the first two chapter titles) comes from Lovelier Other's [Hidden Shelters](#). Other chapter titles, in order, from Purity Ring's [Flood on the Floor](#), Young Wonder's [To You](#), New Order's [586](#), and London Grammar's [Sights](#).

Nancy's haircut was inspired by [this fanart](#). The sweater thing (for lack of a better term), by [this post](#). Columbia University began admitting women in the fall of 1983.

If you want to talk about anything, garbage monster teenz and their further adventures, proper darkroom etiquette (I only got a B in photo, very un-Nancy Wheeler of me), you can find me on Tumblr at [wanderleave](#).

Works inspired by this one:

- [\[Podfic\] hidden shelters](#) by [marianas](#)